Mosaic

A Jewish passenger bus burned by Arabs, 1930s. (Library of Congress.)

RESPONSE TO JULY'S ESSAY

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Hamas Didn't Need to Learn Violence from Frantz Fanon

By Martin Kramer

What Bernard Lewis understood about jihad.

Hussein Aboubakr Mansour is a bold thinker. The fate of the Arab dissident is unenviable, even in the West. Yet Mansour writes with fearless conviction, and I applaud his courage. His *Mosaic* tour de force is densely philosophical and rich in historical detail, delivered with the rhetorical sweep of a manifesto. Mansour offers nothing less than a meta-theory—a unifying explanation for Arab intellectual and political failure. The essay has a hypnotic rhythm: long chains of causation, sweeping generalizations, and grand narrative arcs that pull the reader along.

But after reading Mansour's essay, I conclude I've been in this business too long. I still remember when Yasir Arafat, Edward Said, and Judith Butler were out to prove that the Palestinian "revolution"—and even Hizballah and Hamas—were full members of the "global left" deserving solidarity from decent people. It seemed like a risible proposition.

Now Mansour accepts their premise. Elsewhere, he has written that Butler and Noam Chomsky—who, during a visit to Beirut, embraced the now-martyred Hizballah leader—were "not wrong when they declare that Hamas, Hizballah, and Iran are part of the international left." The difference is that for Mansour, this is no endorsement. Rather, it consigns radical Arabs and Islamists to an even lower circle of the Inferno. Once, the surest way to discredit them was to trace their lineage to the Nazis. For Mansour, it is to declare them the intellectual progeny of Fanon, Sartre, and Régis Debray.

But Mansour must first clear an obstacle: the legacy of Bernard Lewis. His critique of Lewis in the *Mosaic* piece, focused narrowly on Lewis's "civilizational" approach, is restrained; elsewhere, it is not. Here's the fuller version from his Substack:

> Leading Orientalists—most famously Bernard Lewis and his students—devoted their formidable energies to dissecting medieval Islam, old caliphates, and the nuances of Arab honor culture. As invaluable as their scholarship was, they largely missed the far more combustible phenomenon brewing in modern lecture halls, often next door under the tutelage of their radical colleagues, where radical professors were indoctrinating young Arab intellectuals in a gospel of "cleansing violence." Although Lewis and his students enriched our understanding of the region's classical past, they often overlooked the mid-century meltdown fueled

> by postcolonial dogma, which ultimately paved the way for Hamas's nihilistic worldview. Their work regrettably obscured and misguided generations.

This passage oozes condescension. Lewis is cast as an antiquarian—a scholar of medieval and classical Islam, steeped in "old caliphates," not specialized in modern times. In fact, Lewis was also a historian of the modern Middle East, author of *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*. He wrote *The Muslim Discovery of Europe* precisely to examine early modern intellectual encounters with the West. His *Semites and Anti-Semites* analyzed anti-Semitism in contemporary Arab politics, as part of a "new anti-Semitism."

Lewis and his students are portrayed as oblivious to "radical colleagues." But we sounded an early alarm about Middle Eastern studies while everyone else slept. Lewis did so long before I did, in his 1979 article "The State of Middle Eastern Studies." I accompanied him in 1986 when he confronted a mob of "young Arab intellectuals" to debate Edward Said before the Middle East Studies Association (MESA). In his field, history, he minced no words:

> There is a term that has become popular of late—the decolonization of history. The assumption is that the past is another territory which has been conquered, subjugated, settled and exploited by imperialist foreigners and the time has come to liberate the past by assault, by an intellectual liberation struggle. The struggle is on at the moment. It is in the guerrilla or, as some people would put it, the terrorist phase.

His wide network ensured he knew the details of every skirmish in this struggle, and I can attest to his behind-the-scenes exploits in intellectual counterterrorism.

The most troubling claim is that Lewis and his students obscured the forces behind Islamist "nihilism." In reality, Lewis did the opposite. He was among the first to discern the "return of Islam" in the mid-1970s, to expose Ayatollah Khomeini's true agenda before the Iranian revolution, and to warn of Osama bin Laden's ambitions well before 9/11. As I showed in an earlier *Mosaic* article, he defied those shallow "experts" who failed to grasp the violent potential of Islamism.

Lewis also saw through the pretensions of radical Arab poseurs claiming to represent the progressive left. In the 1970s, he ridiculed the Western recourse "to the language of left-wing and right-wing, progressive and conservative, and the rest of the Western terminology, the use of which in explaining Muslim political phenomena is about as accurate and as enlightening as an account of a cricket match by a baseball correspondent."

In particular, he showed how the Lebanese civil war wasn't a conflict between the "leftist" Druze, Muslims, and Palestinians, and the "rightist" Christians—the standard journalistic trope. Instead, it centered on "the power of religious and communal loyalty." Had you taken Lewis's advice and applied such loyalty as the lens for interpreting Arab politics over the next 50 years, you wouldn't have gone far wrong.

In short, the claim that Lewis's work "obscured and misguided generations" is not only ungenerous. It is false. If generations were misguided, it was for ignoring Lewis, not for heeding him.

Now to Mansour's argument itself. At its core, it is a sweeping indictment of Arab and Muslim leftist intellectuals as willing conduits for the transmission of Europe's most destructive ideas. They imported the worst of our metaphysical excesses—born in German idealism, radicalized in French existentialism, refracted through postcolonial theory, and finally packaged as a gospel of redemption through violence. Hegel's dialectics, Marx's class struggle, Heidegger's ontological revolt, Sartre's radical freedom, and Fanon's "cleansing violence"—all, in Mansour's telling, crossed the Mediterranean and took up residence in Arab lecture halls and coffeehouses.

These borrowed ideas did not remain academic curiosities. Translated, vulgarized, and weaponized, they became the animating spirit of Arab revolutionary movements and, ultimately, of the jihadists. What began as speculative European theories—salvation through negation, liberation through destruction—metastasized into a cult of terror, anti-Semitism, and apocalyptic martyrdom. Mansour's argument reaches its crescendo when he insists that the "Islam of Iran, Islamic State, the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, Hizballah, and al-Qaeda is simply a regional variant of progressive revolutionary thought."

So what's the grain of truth here? Islamism *is* infected by radical ideas from the West.

As I'm sure Mansour knows, this is not an entirely new insight. I first encountered it in the writings of Elie Kedourie, while a student. On the general plane, Kedourie's *Nationalism in Asia and Africa* anticipates Mansour:

> Resentment and impatience, the depravity of the rich and the virtue of the poor, the guilt of Europe and the innocence of Asia and Africa, salvation through violence, the coming reign of universal love: these are the elements of the thought of Sultan Galiev and Li Ta-chao, of Ikki Kita, Michel Aflaq, and Frantz Fanon. This theory is now the most popular and influential one in Asia and Africa. It is Europe's latest gift to the world. . . . Theory has become the opium of the masses.

Kedourie extended this analysis to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. "To say that the Muslim Brothers appealed to purely Islamic sentiments is, of course, by no means to deny that they were themselves profoundly touched by European ways of thought. . . . [Their writings] are traditionalist rather than traditional in character. They are impregnated with European thought."

Lewis struck the same note years later, in regards to the Iranian revolution:

> While its symbols and allusions were Islamic rather than European, its models of style and method were often more European than Islamic. The summary trial and execution of great numbers of ideologically defined enemies; the driving into exile of hundreds of thousands of men and women; the large-scale confiscation of private property; the mixture of repression and subversion, of violence and indoctrination that accompanied the consolidation of power—all this owes far more to the examples of Robespierre and Stalin than to those of Mohammad and Ali. These methods can hardly be called Islamic; they are, however, thoroughly revolutionary.

It was precisely because Lewis knew the "old caliphates" that he could flag the modern deviations with authority. Orientalism does have its uses.

But if Mansour's theory is not new, he takes it to new extremes. First, he identifies specific lines of transmission for these bad ideas; and second, he posits that they have overwritten the whole tradition. When we look at these movements, we see our own distorted reflection. There is nothing "Islamic" there.

The *frisson* in Mansour's essay resides in these two claims. But the problems emerge as soon as we move from abstraction to detail. Mansour invokes "intellectual contagion" as his metaphor. But with any contagion, the vectors are elusive. Consider anti-Semitism. There's a long-running debate over how modern anti-Semitism penetrated the Arab and Muslim worlds. On which ship did it arrive? Which quarantine did it evade? With which local strains did it recombine? And who, if anyone, proved immune? The questions proliferate because the evidence resists certainty.

Skepticism is warranted—especially when it comes to claims of direct intellectual lineage. Take Mansour's assertion that the ideas of Fanon, Sartre, and Debray "saturated Arab intellectual life; . . . translated, disseminated, debated, and ultimately embraced as the catechism of a new moral order." Or this: "While well-meaning Orientalists dissected the complexities of hadith or early Arab conquests, the next generation of revolutionaries was devouring [Fanon's] *The Wretched of the Earth*, adopting its blueprint for eradicating real or perceived 'colonizers.'"

I share Mansour's contempt for the Arab left and the cult of violence that Fanon and Sartre legitimized. But the evidentiary trail for their influence seems thin.

Sartre enjoyed a substantial Arab following—until 1967, when he was abruptly cast off as a Zionist stooge. Fanon, by contrast, was translated and occasionally discussed in Arab leftist circles, but his influence appears shallow and uneven. Three Algerian observers, in a 2011 study of Fanon's impact on Arab thought, found him "scarcely known in the Arab world." He sparked a brief burst of interest in Lebanon in the 1970s, but over the next three decades "little new work on Fanon emerged, and most of it was limited to translations, with academic studies being even rarer."

Arabic references to him became "slightly more frequent" after the Iraq war, but these were "very modest when compared to the volume of material published about him in other

regions of the world." As for Algeria, "where Fanon's ideas could have been the obvious conduit to the rest of the Arab world, there was a deliberate effort to marginalize his thought in public and political life."

In the same vein, what should we make of this from a Syrian scholar-activist writing in 2012?

> Fanon is almost absent in public discourses in the Middle East and is still marginal in the Maghreb. . . . His books are either out of print or conspicuously absent from many bookstores in the Arab world. . . . Some intellectuals have either consciously avoided him or are ignorant about his work and its implications on contemporary Arab societies. . . . How can one make an argument for the relevance of Fanon when he is so absent in public discourses?

These complaints come not from Arab critics of Fanon but from his admirers, frustrated that their prophet never quite found his Arab apostles. Mansour may think otherwise, and he may be right. But I suspect that the Arab veneration of Fanon—at an all-time high since October 7—is largely a recent invention since the Arab Spring.

What about Mansour's arresting claims that "jihadism grew out of the ideas of the Arab left," and, even more striking, that Hamas is "a lethal child of Fanon"—a point Mansour makes on his Substack? If this lineage were real, we should find some trace of Fanon in jihadist rhetoric or Hamas's declarations: an allusion, a borrowed phrase, even a nod to his vocabulary of liberation. There is none.

The 1988 Hamas charter cites not a single Marxist, postcolonial, or revolutionary thinker. Its ideological scaffolding is drawn almost entirely from Islamic scripture and conspiracist lore. The charter invokes exactly one non-Muslim source—and not from the progressive left: *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. The other citations come straight from the Qur'an, with 22 quotations, and the hadith, with 11—including a canonical hadith that every Hamas member probably knows by heart:

> The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) said, "The [judgment] hour will not come until the Muslims fight the Jews and kill them. When a Jew hides

> behind a rock or a tree, it will say, 'O Muslim, O servant of Allah! There is a Jew behind me, come and kill him!'"

The internet features countless imams reciting the same hadith. Who needs Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* when such a rich source requires no translation? Mansour would have us believe that Islamism and jihadism are "simply a regional variant of progressive revolutionary thought." Yet here we have an alleged "regional variant" with its own sacred texts, vocabulary, and historical narrative—all in classical Arabic. That strongly suggests it may be a variant of something else.

There is also a chronological conundrum. Mansour speaks of a "cult of terror, abductions, murdering civilians, and ultimately martyrdom, which as a matter of historical record started with Palestinian Maoists, Leninists, Arabists, etc." But as a matter of historical record, Palestinian Arabs were murdering Jews and celebrating martyrs in the 1920s and 1930s—long before any Palestinian Maoists, Leninists, or Arabists existed.

This is the story of the Hebron massacre, as Hillel Cohen recounts in *1929: Year Zero of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, and of the "Arab Revolt," traced by Oren Kessler in *Palestine 1936: The Great Revolt and the Roots of the Middle East Conflict*. In both cases, the calls to jihad and martyrdom didn't await the arrival of foreign theory. They were already embedded in the indigenous idiom.

Yet these are the events Palestinians invoke when tracing the origins of their own "resistance." This is obvious in Hamas, but also true of the far-left Palestinian novelist Ghassan Kanafani, whom Mansour mentions as another vector of leftist infection. Kanafani wrote a study titled *The Revolution of 1936–1939 in Palestine*, an insurgency he tried to force into a Marxist straightjacket. But even he had to acknowledge "the dialectical relationship between religion and nationalist tendencies," given the revolt's reliance on Islamic rhetoric. Its hero, a Muslim preacher, refused to surrender when surrounded because he was fighting "a jihad in the path of God" and urged his followers to "die as martyrs!" Kanafani called this "a kind of Guevara-esque heroism," but Che was only seven at the time. Jihad didn't need him.

It hasn't needed Fanon either. Fanon didn't inspire jihadism in the East; he's been repurposed to launder it in the West, making it palatable to Morningside Heights leftists who loathe Israel and the West but blanch at the bloodshed. By invoking Fanon, they can "contextualize" massacres, rapes, mutilations, and abductions as inevitable eruptions of the oppressed.

These keffiyeh-draped fashionistas thus graduate from useful idiots of Muslim supremacists to self-styled dialecticians of "spontaneous" resistance. If my reading holds, Fanon is a Trojan horse of terror on Western campuses, not its muse in Arabian madrasas.

I began with Mansour's argument and its intrinsic appeal. But there's another reason it resonates. Islam has always stood as an enigma to Western observers. Its disciplined study is no easy undertaking, and the findings of scholarship remain opaque to most. With Bernard Lewis gone, no one remains to interpret it for the broader public.

How tempting, then, to wish the whole intricate structure away—to erase 1,400 years of theology and jurisprudence, and compress the entire tradition into a digest of modern ideologies. If everything in these "enchanted Arab minds" were just a variation on what we heard in Intro to Western Thought, the opacity would lift. They would be us. The spectacle would no longer resemble cricket. It would play like baseball.

Imagine, too, if all the region's agony could be traced to a familiar villain—if October 7 and 9/11 weren't eruptions from another world but the distant thunder of the Western left's own moral failure. The skies would clear. "The Islam of Iran, Islamic State, the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, Hizballah, and al-Qaeda is *simply* a regional variant of progressive revolutionary thought" (my emphasis). All would become legible, and our local leftists would be culpable.

It was precisely this temptation that Lewis resisted when he wrote "The Return of Islam," half a century ago this coming January. "As medieval Christian man could only conceive of religion in terms of a trinity," he observed, "so his modern descendant can only conceive of politics in terms of a theology or, as we now say, ideology, of left-wing and right-wing forces and factions." That Western lens, he warned, could not perceive Islam as "an independent,

different, and autonomous religious phenomenon [that] persists and recurs from medieval to modern times."

One of Lewis's Princeton colleagues on the left fell into just that trap. Richard Falk, who met Ayatollah Khomeini in early 1979, came away convinced that "the depiction of him as fanatical, reactionary, and the bearer of crude prejudices seems certainly and happily false." Khomeini's message was reassuringly familiar, about "resisting oppression and promoting social justice." Building on this confusion, Khomeini turned the Western left into his cheering section. Falk would later admit: "I should have been more suspicious of . . . the Islamic dimensions of the revolution."

Today, Mansour writes that "the Western radical professor who admires a Hamas fighter . . . understands rightly that they share something in common." Perhaps they do, though the nature of that commonality is not always obvious and may be quite limited. But should we really enable the disciples of Butler and Chomsky to present Hamas as one of their own, as a movement "resisting oppression and promoting social justice"? It isn't just a distortion. It's a strategic blunder.

Finally, I don't share Mansour's concluding pessimism. "The West, too, has passed from truth to narrative," he laments, "from history to trauma, from politics to identity—and increasingly into nihilism." Lewis heard similar doubts in the 1940s and 50s, when Nazi and Soviet threats loomed over dark skies. But he never lost faith in the resilience of the liberal West, and he lived to see both tyrannies decisively defeated.

To suppose now that campus radicals and their encampments signal the demise of the West is exaggerated. As the critic Pascal Bruckner put it: "The West is not *in* crisis, it *is* crisis"—restless, self-doubting, self-questioning. It's precisely this perpetual tumult that fuels its renewal, and nowhere more so than in America. Indeed, at this moment we are witnessing an unprecedented rollback of campus radicalism. Culture wars should never be mistaken for Armageddon.

There's a second reason to resist despair. The tide may have turned in the Middle East. The rule of the Baath party, once dominant in Syria and Iraq, has collapsed after 60 years. The "return of Islam," now 50 years old, has run aground. The Islamic Republic is brittle.

Hizballah is pinned down. Hamas is under siege. The Muslim Brotherhood is suppressed. Islamic State and al-Qaeda are shadows of themselves. This is not their moment. It could be ours—if we know what to make of it.

Explore: Bernard Lewis Radical Islam Hamas

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